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WAR MEMORIES

by Walter Karliner

My name is Walter Karliner, and I was born in Peiskretscham (Silesia) Germany. My parents, Joseph and Martha, had a grocery store, and my father was also a horse trader. Because we were religious and had a Kosher home, my parents didn't allow me and my siblings to attend school on Saturdays so that we could observe the Sabbath. In Germany, at that time, Saturday was a school day.

There were four children in our family: Ilse, the oldest, was born in 1922, I, Walter, was born in 1924, Herbert was born in 1926, and Ruth was born in 1928.

Our small Silesian town of Peiskretscham had a population of approximately 18,000, including 30 Jewish families, a Synagogue and a Rabbi who gave Hebrew lessons to the young Jewish children in town. In 1936, I had my Bar Mitzvah, and over 100 people attended. The Jewish community of the town pooled their money to purchase a bicycle for me on this memorable religious occasion.

As Hitler came to power, we noticed an increasing amount of anti-Semitism. I was the only Jew in my class of 55 boys and the principal was a very decent man. However, a Nazi teacher beat me frequently for no reason. Once he beat me so hard that my whole behind was severely bruised, and I couldn't sit for weeks. My parents did not even attempt to notify the police about this cruel treatment because we were Jewish and they knew that no one would care and nothing would be done about it.

At this same time, my father's business started to decline due to the increasing anti-Jewish climate. I will never forget the horror of November 1938, Kristalnacht, when the Nazis violently broke into and destroyed our store and sent my father to a concentration camp. During his absence, an SS agent forced my mother to sell our house and store for 16,000 marks, even though it was worth close to 46,000 marks. My father was in the camp for about four weeks when my mother managed to purchase a ticket and get a visa so that he would be allowed to travel to Shanghai. At that time, the Germans were happy to get rid of Jews and allowed them to leave the country as long as they had a visa. When he was let out of the camp and came home, he looked terribly thin and his hair had been shaved.

In order to keep the family together, my father decided to try to go to Madagascar, which was still a jungle at that time. Finally, we were able to obtain visas for all the family to go to Cuba, where we knew that friends and relatives were also planning to go. We packed our belongings consisting of beds,a refrigerator, sewing machines, and even my prized bicycle, into 26 large wooden crates.

We left for Hamburg on May 7, 1939 and stayed in the hotel Bismark until May 13th, when our ship left for Cuba. My mother was crying bitterly. The whole world would

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eventually know about the infamous voyage of the German ship St.Louis, of the Hamburg-America line. Before crossing the Atlantic, the ship stopped at Southhampton, England, where additional passengers, mostly Jewish, embarked.

The first day at sea was very rough. One of the Jewish passengers became quite sick and died three or four days after we left Hamburg. His body was thrown into the water while the ship stopped. Another death occurred when one of two Russian crew members (the rest were German) committed suicide by jumping in the ocean. Except for these incidents, the trip was quite pleasant: good food and nightly dancing, which I remember vividly thanks to photographs showing my parents dancing while we children watched.

Arriving in Cuba, our ship was not allowed to dock and had to remain in the middle of the port of Havana. Cuban port authorities surrounded our ship and some came aboard. They refused to let us disembark because they declared that our visas were false. We suddenly realized that we had been cheated by those who sold us the visas at a very high price.

We remained on the ship, unauthorized to enter Cuba, for several days. One of the passengers, a lawyer, organized the sending of telegrams to President Roosevelt, to Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt and to the city of St. Louis. We were hoping that Mrs. Roosevelt would take pity on the children on ship and that the city of St. Louis would care about the plight of those on a ship bearing the name of their town. The only ones who tried to help were the passengers' relatives, now living in Cuba, and the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee. Unfortunately, we were never allowed to disembark in Cuba, nor were we allowed to enter the United States.

During our stay in the Havana harbor, a lawyer from Breslau attempted suicide, cutting his wrists and jumping off the ship. When my sister and I ran to see what was happening, all we saw was his head in a pool of bloody water. One of the crew members rescued him, and he was allowed to be taken off the ship to be treated in a Cuban hospital. However, his wife and children were denied access to land. In contrast, about 25 non-Jewish passengers on the ship were allowed to disembark.

I must, at this time, mention that the German captain really tried to save us all, and for his efforts he now occupies an honored place in the Yad Vashem Museum in Israel. We, the passengers, have also honored his memory at a recent reunion of the ship's survivors held in Florida.

Our ship was forced to return to Europe. On the return trip, conditions were no longer pleasant. There was very little food or drinkable water. We landed in Antwerp, Belgium. Thanks to the efforts of the Joint Commission, Belgium, Holland, France and England each agreed to accept 25 % of the 900 passengers on ship. At Antwerp, a German freighter, The Rakotis , took those of us bound for England and France to our destinations.

In June, 1939, my family arrived in Boulogne, where we were housed in a depot. There, representatives of the Joint Commission and the UJA-supported OSE(Oevres du Secours aux

Enfants), an organization in charge of helping children, offered to take my brother Herbert, my sister Ruth, and me to their boarding school, the Villa Helvetia, situated near Paris. At the school, we learned French. Ilse, my older sister, did not qualify because she was too old to be admitted. She remained with my parents and an uncle, Dr. Walter Weissler. The Joint Organization helped them settle in Mirebeau, near Poitiers, France.

In September, 1939, after the outbreak of the war between Germany and France, the children from our school, as well as from other Jewish schools, were sent to the central part of France. We were sent to the Chateau de Chaumont, located in the Department of the Creuze. There, my brother worked for a local baker and I for a cabinet maker. Our sister Ruth, who was very unhappy there, joined our parents in Mirebeau.

In 1940, France was divided into occupied and non-occupied territories, with Vichy as the capital of the non-occupied territories. My brother and I were in the non-occupied zone, while the rest of my family was trapped in German-occupied territory.

In 1941, my brother and I were separated by the OSE so that we each could learn a trade. My brother remained in the Chateau de Chaumont to learn how to be a baker, and I was sent about 150 km. from there to the Chateau de Montintin for training in cabinetry.

In August, 1942, the French gendarmes informed the home that all boys over the age of 16 will be sent to Germany. My friend Rudolph and I hid in the woods, and I decided that we would walk back to the Chateau de Chaumont where I knew some farmers who, hopefully, would hide us. We walked for about one week, slept in the woods, asked farmers for water and stole fruit from the trees. Finally, we arrived at the Chateau which had become an all-girls home. My brother wasn't there anymore. I had heard from some local people that my brother had been taken to a camp and released because he wasn't yet 16 years of age. Rudolph and I spent a few months in the cellar of the Chateau de Chaumont because the supervisors did not want them to mingle with the girls. The girls, by the way, were extremely excited to see boys since they had been isolated in the Chateau away from the opposite sex for a very long time.

Subsequently, the French-Jewish Underground arranged for us to receive false identification papers at Narbonne (Aude). There, we were hidden in a mental institution with six other Jewish boys. The place was full of lice and bed bugs. There was no food, but we were able to come and go as we wished. We bought lots of jam, which was made from grapes and sold to us without the need to produce food cards. So we lived on jam. Meanwhile, two of the Jewish boys decided to get us all out of the institution. They went to Switzerland, but never returned, leaving the rest of us stranded in the home. One of the boys was my friend Rudolph.

Narbonne is close to the Pyrenees and Spain, so we decided to escape from the asylum and go to Spain. We slept

for several nights on the benches of a church where a priest tried to help us get over the Spanish border. Unfortunately, this plan failed. The French-Jewish underground sent us to Castelsarrasin (Tern et Garonne), where there were 60 Jewish boys and girls working on different farms. I worked on a farm for eight months, and then I was told that the Gestapo had been informed that this area had become a hideout for Jews. My real nightmare begins at this point.

I was directed to a woman in Agen (Lot and Garonne) who was hiding several Jews and agreed to hide me as well. One day, returning from the city, I saw two men at her door, trying to enter the house. When I saw them, I walked up to the next floor where a doctor resided. The two men, wearing civilian clothing, approached me and asked what I was doing there. I told them that I didn't feel well and wanted to consult with the doctor. They asked to see my papers, and I showed them my false papers.

They detected my German accent, so I said that I was born in Alsace-Lorraine. They ordered me to follow them, and walked me to the city, holding me by my coat-sleeves. I managed to free myself from my coat, while passers-by shouted "Thief, thief, stop him!" They soon captured me and brought me to the police station in Agen. The Chief of Police beat me up and told me that nobody had ever escaped from his custody. They took away my belt and shoelaces and threw me in prison where I was fed beans, hot dogs and wine. After about two hours, the Chief of Police called me into his office, and told me that he knew that I was Jewish and that I was carrying false papers. But because I wasn't on his list of Jews wanted by the Gestapo, he decided to let me go on condition that I leave the city within 12 hours. Of course, I left immediately, taking with me my false papers, which the Chief had returned.

I don't remember clearly how I got in touch with the Jewish underground, a division of the Eclaireurs Israelites (Jewish Scouts). They sent me to Toulouse to meet a contact person on a bridge near the train station. From there, I was directed to meet my brother who was now working on a farm near Lyon. The train that I took was packed with people. A French policeman and an agent of the Gestapo were asking every other or third person to show their identification papers. They also asked questions such as, "Where were you born?" "What is the name of certain monuments in that town?" "What is the name of the school in that town?", and other probing questions.

I was terrified, and thought for sure that my end was near. Then, I thought of going to the bathroom, but that would have made me very conspicuous. I decided to stay put. The two men asked all kinds of questions of the passengers next to me, but they never asked me anything, perhaps because I looked so young and always wore short pants.

When I arrived in Lyon, my contact person from the underground told me that I could not join my brother. Instead, he gave me money to go to St. Junien, near Limoges (Haute Vienne). St. Junien was a home for boys run by the

Vichy government and the Boy Scouts of France. There were about six Jewish boys living among the 80 boys at the home. It was a trade school, and, again, I learned cabinetry. We wore uniforms, which helped us to hide from the police.

A few days after the invasion of Normandy, I was in Limoges where I saw a whole division of SS Pantzer troops hiding in their tanks amongst tall trees. The men were 18-25 years of age. The next day, they destroyed a whole village, herding mothers and children into a church and then setting it on fire. The men were forced into a barn which also was put to flame. This village, Oradur Sur Glane, was never rebuilt and is now the site of a Memorial to the victims of World War II.

After the liberation, I went to a Jewish Boy Scout Home in Moissac (Tarn et Garonne), a kosher home for about 200 Jewish children. Here, I became an instructor in cabinetry and earned a small salary. My brother, at this time, came out of hiding and joined me. We both looked forward to reuniting with our parents in Mirebeaux, near Poitier. Unfortunately, we never saw our parents again.

I learned recently, at a meeting of the Hidden Children Organization, that my mother and two sisters had been taken, on October, 1942, to Drancy and then sent to Auschwitz. Our father had been arrested at the same time, but because of illness, was sent to the Rothchild Hospital in Paris. Somehow, I found out that he was there, so I sent him grapes and jam, using a false name. ~~Tragically, we will never know whether or not he received the food~~. Yes he received the Grapes

Having lost our close family members, my brother and I got in touch with relatives in Hartford, Connecticut and in Baltimore, Maryland. They sent us an affidavit that would allow us to come to the United States. In 1947, after one year of waiting, we arrived in the U.S. first, in Baltimore, and then in Hartford, where we decided to settle. My brother got a job as a baker in Hartford, and I found work in the Bill Hahns Hotel in Westbrook, Connecticut. That hotel is still in existence and is now called "Water's Edge".

I started working at menial jobs and eventually bought a used car and taught myself how to drive.The owner of the hotel was a lover of art and theater and so were most of his guests. I began to drive the hotel guests to museums and theaters to earn some extra money. After a few years, I was able to buy a lot and build a house and an antique shop where I live and work today. I never married, and I'm often depressed. My brother did get married and has children. He moved to Miami, Florida, where, in May, 1989, he organized a reunion of the survivors of the St Louis' voyage. Twenty-seven former passengers and their families attended. In May 1997 my Brother and others organised a Reunion in Miami of former OSE Children, about 150 attended

I know my Father received the grapes

(6) My Fals Papers 1942 – 1945

N° 164 A

Signature : Kiener

NOM KIENER

Prénoms Paul

Date et lieu de naissance 11 aout 19[illegible]

à Eloyes

Profession menuisier

Adresse allée Beaulieu

Date d'adhésion 21 septembre 1944

A Limoges, le 21 septembre

Le Secrétaire,

Jacques

SECTION DU LIMOUSIN F. SIEGE DE LIMOGES

Enregistré sous le N° 41.959

CARTE D'IDENTITÉ

NOM Kiener

Prénoms William Paul

Profession s. p.

Né le 11 août 1926

à Eloyes

Département Vosges

Nationalité française

Domicile MONTPELLIER

3 rue des Deux Ponts

DUPLICATA 13 FRANCS

SIGNALEMENT

Taille 1 m 64

Cheveux châtains

Moustache —

Yeux Vert foncé

Signes particuliers néant

Nez / Dos / Dimensions moyen

Forme du visage ovale

Teint clair

Empreinte digitale

Le Titulaire,

Kiener Paul

Les Témoins

POUR LE MAIRE ET L'ADJOINT

Vu pour la légalisation

Le 5 JANV 1943

MONTPELLIER

Pièce justificative fournie : bulletin de naissance

ÉTAT FRANÇAIS

CARTE D'IDENTITÉ

Nom KARLINER

Prénoms Paul

Profession Menuisier

Nationalité Française

Né le 11 Août 1926

à Thionville

Domicile Centre des J. T. à St Junien

SIGNALEMENT

Taille 1760 Cheveux Chataints

Bouche Moyenne Yeux gris

Visage Ovale Teint Coloré

Signes particuliers Néant

DUPLICATA 15 FRANCS

Signature du Titulaire

Paul Karliner

Etabli à SAINT-JUNIEN

Le 20 Mai 1944 19

Empreinte Digitale

Le Maire ou le Commissaire